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# WOMAN AND STASIS: TWO 'UNPOLITICAL' OPERATORS OF THE POLITICAL

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the relationship between sexual difference and stasis as it is defined by Nicole Loraux in her studies on conflict and politics in classical Athens. As one of the most influential researcher of the classical city, Loraux has investigated the relationship between division and oblivion in the Greek political space, pinpointing the fundamental relationship between politics and conflict and highlighting the division at the heart of the rhetoric of the “City as one”, *Hé Polis*, and as an harmonic and rational space of freedom and logos.

## **Keywords**

Stasis, women, conflict, politics, sexual difference.

## Resumen

Este artículo investiga la relación entre la diferencia sexual y la estasis tal como la define Nicole Loraux en sus estudios sobre el conflicto y la política en la Atenas clásica. Como uno de los investigadores más influyentes de la ciudad clásica, Loraux ha investigado la relación entre división y olvido en el espacio político griego, identificando la relación fundamental entre política y conflicto y destacando la división en el corazón de la retórica de la “Ciudad como uno”, *hé polis*, y como un espacio armónico y racional de libertad y logos.

## Palabras clave

Estasis, mujeres, conflicto, política, diferencia sexual.

Nicole Loraux's analysis of the Athenian culture names the foundational role of conflict and division in political spaces. Analyzing on the inescapable dimension of "two-ness" –which does not just mean dichotomies, nor opposing and dialectical relationships between two elements– and its insolvable bond with politics, Loraux challenges most of the research premises both in the philosophy of politics and historical studies, reinventing them in their fundamentals. Although her studies on the coextensivity of politics and conflict focus on a specific time –the Athenian polis of the 5th century BC–, her categories and reflections speak to a broader and more general frame, going beyond the classical city, shedding light on some fundamental political issues of our times. Her work has demonstrated to be a useful and important tool for broader political horizons and has revealed to be fundamental for any analysis of politics, conflict, and violence in our present times.

Rethinking politics and democracy today means to face what the democratic rhetoric claims as its foundational and genealogical dimension. As the Athenian polis has often been praised as the birthplace for our contemporary democracies, all discourses arguing such a genealogy reproduce its official self-representation, its civic values and the image of politics in democracy as a harmonic, consensual, free, and rational space (Loraux, 1980, 2006a). Hence, they also reproduce the Athenian denial of the civic conflict, the stasis, as well as its refusal of difference, division, and disorder.

Loraux (2006b) refuses the archetype of the Athenian polis, and emphasizes the radical value of a political body which is able to assume its undeniable component of conflict. Western politics aims to be what the polis pretended to be: a neutralizing homogenous space of order, freedom, and rationality. The political challenge behind Loraux's focus on conflict and division is clear: a civic space that understands the conflictual dimension as constitutive element of politics is, according to Loraux, able to take on responsibility of its ambivalence, and its bond with division and difference, which is as strong as the ideological bond of consensus and brotherhood.

Loraux gives absolute centrality to the investigation of the relationship between politics and conflict, pinpointing difference and division at the heart of the *Hé Polis* ("The City") and its political image of a homogenous, peaceful, rational and orderly *kosmos*. The Athenian democracy is built on the systematic denial of real conflicts and historical divisions. This becomes evident in the Athenian myth of autochthony, which removes both the idea of sexual reproduction and conflict from the civic space (Loraux, 1996). The City wants to be one, and always the same: an everlasting and never-ending entity standing strong against the multiplicity of time, against historical

events and processes of change. Therefore, the City has to remove, deny, and forget about all those elements that interrupt and trouble the civic *aei*, the recurring and perpetual time of the “City as one”.

The Athenian polis articulates a double image, reflecting the Athenian civic values: on one side, we find “the City” in peace, held by an invisible weave of harmony that holds all the citizens together in a big and unmatched family, and is supported by the orderly dimension of civil institutions; on the other side: the City in arms, fighting against other poleis. These two sides of the Athenian polis produce an ideology where conflict inside civic space is just impossible to imagine.

In order to overcome this static and artificial image of the City, we have to investigate its internal tensions and inner contradictions. We have to doubt civic discourse and its ideology of meson. We have to expose the polis, and politics, to what it refuses: those divisions that actually lay the foundations of the political space as much as they menace to destroy it.

Civic orthodoxy puts stasis –the conflict inside civic space– in strong opposition to the glorious and just war outside the city walls, *polemos*. *Polemos* is the name of the civic, political, and heroic conflict. The paradigm of civic magnificence *polemos* gathers all citizens in one people of warriors who are ready to face “beautiful death”: the glorious fearless death of those who die for their polis. Opposed to *polemos*, stasis is the name of the civil war, which is always bloody, and blinded by rage; it is the cruel and irrational internal conflict. Stasis is the name of fights and murder in the streets; it is the clashes where the homicide fury seduces and drags in women; it is the conflict where everything is admitted and the most horrible murders happen.

By imposing a clear dichotomy between stasis and *polemos*, the City puts conflict outside the political space, imagining polis as a peaceful unity. Following the ideology of an egalitarian polis rooted in meson, conflict is put outside, where it turns into a licit and desirable war. Inside the polis there is no place for anything else but peace. Outside, conflict is protected by the goddess Athena. As a virgin and warrior, she leads the Athenian people –called *Stratos* (army) by Aeschylus (1984), indeed– in the battle. Stasis and *polemos* outline a good and a bad side of the political conflict and they do it spatially: inside or outside the civic space, the conflict is a menace or a vocation. While war reinforces the political community, civil conflict destroys the polis from the inside, damaging social bonds.

The Aeschylean tragedy *The Eumenides* tells us about the political overcoming of stasis into *polemos*. In the three works of his tragic trilogy, Aeschylus describes the

proliferation of crime and murder “in the family”, to be intended as a metaphor for the political space. Erinyes are figures of discord. They embody the ferocious violence that destroys civic equilibrium and drowns the City in blood. Their presence inside the civic space has to be prevented because discord must stay outside the city walls. Their final transformation into Eumenides, guardians of the City, reveals something crucial: the implicit symbolic process through which social conflict is overcome by civic practices. From unpolitical disorder to political order, from dissension to harmony, conflict assumes the role of dysfunction and disease of the civic order. In the civic discourse stasis is a *loimos*, a catastrophe, and a curse; it is a *phthora*, a disease of the political. Denying any bond between politics and conflict, Athens equates stasis to a catastrophe coming from outside its peaceful and rational boundaries. It is a curse and a menace that brings disorder and chaos inside the political community, and leads to a subversion of all civic values and social bonds.

Stasis –as the term suggests us– designates the ambivalence par excellence for the civic official discourse: between confusion and order, motion and stillness. Stasis is the name of disagreement as sedition; it is the faction, the stance on something that turns into division and degenerates into violence and murder. Stasis is the movement of the “two” –as a symbol of division– against civic unity. While *polemos* gathers citizens into a unicum, stasis divides the polis from the inside. Killing a citizen is killing your own brother, your equal, yourself. That is stasis in the civic representation: the horror of regression to brutality, the subversion of civic values, the end of unity and the return of multiplicities; a catastrophe for an order that pretends to be universal.

By means of various strategies, *Hé Polis* enacts a veto to division, to the “two” that both founds the political space and menaces it. This is true both for stasis and for sexual difference. They are both operators of the civic public discourse upon which the civic image of the polis is built. Identified as not political dimensions, they structure by contrast what it is to be intended as political: freedom, logos, brotherhood, and consensus. As said, the myth of autochthony, and the brotherhood of citizens it implies, denies both the division and sexual reproduction. With one single narrative dispositive both operators of division are neutralized in the official discourse. *Hé Polis* is a civic family made of equals and brothers who are all born directly from the Athenian soil. It excludes from representation both the internal conflict –that the blood-relation puts as natural and unnatural at the same time– and women as a “race” that embodies a (sexual) difference that menaces the City. Both differential operators of the political, woman and conflict are at the same time coextensive to the political space and interdicted from it.

They are denied, derealized and banned by the official discourse. It is no surprise, then, that the civic image sets them together: as the civic order starts to crack women appear on the scene. Loraux highlights the inevitable and verifiable bond between conflict and female sex in the civic discourse: once the “City as one” is spoiled by stasis, it is impossible for the civic discourse not to face what most radically calls into question its logic of identity, that is –according to Loraux– sexual difference. That is why every discourse on conflict ends up in an argument on women as elements of disorder.

Polemos is for men, while stasis involves women. Is it because, following the myth, the appearance of their “race” has divided the humanity in two, causing the fall of Anthropos into the necessity of birth and death? Besides Erinyes, classical thought provides us with plenty of representations of this bond, such as Helen, who embodies Eris and is the cause of the bloody war of Troy; or Pandora, introducing *Ponos* –son of the goddess Eris– among mortals; the lyric poet Pindar defines the civil war as *antianeira* (hostile to *andres*), using the same term that in the Greek cultural tradition had already used for Amazons. There are several tales suggesting a secret link between the city as divided into two opposite parties, and describing women as “half of the city”. In his description of the horrors of stasis in Corcyra, Thucydides proposes an identification between civil war and women: subverting any rule, during stasis women fight together with citizens; roaring and turmoiling, they hit enemies with shingles from the roofs. This has nothing to do with the schemes and the order of the *opolitic* war, nor has it anything to do with glorious death on the battlefield. The clash is conducted with improvised unconventional weapons, in a shameful conflict. Thucydides promotes this association by a characterization of the stasis as a conflict that undermines courage and the *andreia* upon which the civic order is built. Through the subversion of values and the overturning on the linguistic level it produces (*andreia/antianeira*), stasis, conflict in the city, seizes the name for *andreia* and gives life to a clash that has nothing to do with the courage of men fighting for their city. Once virility is attacked, the woman enters the scene. Civil war is *anandros*, destroying *andreia* and those male values that establish the civic space. *Opolitic* composure is replaced by massacres in the streets, by shouts, and women fighting. No glory: death in stasis is a dreadful, inglorious, body lying on the street side. It is a dishonorable, female death. When brothers kill one another the taboo of murder in the family is broken, a crime that both theatre and official civic discourses depict as female. In this classical ideology, murder in domestic space and massacre of one’s own lineage (namely of male members of the family) is a woman’s thing. That is why Clytemnestre’s death by his son Orestes is an awful derailment the Erinyes have to punish. Murder in

the family is a horrible crime against nature and it is a woman crime, since the woman's status in human *phusis* is ambiguous and uncertain for Greeks.

There is another overlapping point between women and stasis. In the official civic rhetoric, *politikos* is the man who can forget the injustice received, overcoming his rage through civic friendship. Remembrance of injustices menaces the "City as one"; any possibility of revenge, retaliation, and division must sink into oblivion. Politics, Loraux (2006a) says, has a strong link with oblivion, since the very idea of what is political arises from the oblivion of what is to be considered not political or "unpolitical" (bodies, nature, violence, sexual difference); stasis, instead, lives through remembrance. The wrath and grief, fostered by remembrance, establish a continuous repetition, a perpetual presence in mourning, an *αἶ* challenging the *αἶ* of the City.

Remembrance is an "unpolitical" act. In order to preserve unity in the civic community, the polis enacts several strategies, all rooted into oblivion, which is recognized as a civic value. The political practice of oblivion is what Loraux identifies as the most evident label of the Greek political space, making it possible to think the "City as one". Like Poseidon –who forgets his rage after his defeat in the challenge with Athena for being the eponymous god of the Athenian polis–, the citizen has to forgive and forget. That is why in 403 BC, after Thirty Tyrants and the civil war, Athens will decide for a general amnesty imposing an oath of oblivion to all its citizens.

Amnesty/Amnesia: division must sink into oblivion, since remembrance of conflict leads to vengeance. Once again, it is no surprise that in the Athenian civic discourse women become official figures of remembrance. The unpolitical feminine refusal to forget is a menace for the City, since it carries the risk of division in the political space through rage and resentment, through the recurrence of mourning and remembrance of grief. Women are memory, remembrance; during pregnancy, their bodies become memory and protection of the male mark; they are the sorrow that leads to vengeance and division; they are the excess in the political normativity; they are a menace for the political fiction of the "City as one"; they are the risk of falling into discord, conflict, division. This is why, according to ancient Greeks, women are not political.

As an operator of division, the "race of women" is linked to stasis and memory; to revenge and to its wrath. The division women bring in the political space has to be excluded, and both the conflict and the feminine have to be disarmed, neutralized, conformed, in order to be admitted into the civic discourse. Remembrance, women, and stasis can all be overcome by a neutralizing integration in the civic discourse and institutional practices. Once neutralized, we find them all together in a very political



space: the temple of Metròon, raised for the Mother (of gods), and housing the official archives of the City. Raised in order to appease the Mother's *menis* after the murder of her minister by Athenians, it reproduces (and neutralizes) the bond between women and rage, women and memory. After the Metròon is raised, the Mother overcomes her wrath and becomes "political". She can now protect the archives and the civic memory. The body of the mother becomes a safe and sacred space, at the heart of the polis, where all laws and decrees are kept with care. This is a perfect example of the Athenian procedure for soothing what threatens the civic *kosmos* through a neutralizing conversion and incorporation.

Excluded by the official discourse, stasis, together with women, are the two fundamental operators of the Athenian political space. The polis aims to be a whole, a unity, a homogeneous space of brotherhood and freedom. Its identity is structured by the exclusion of what is not recognized as political; in this sense, Athenian unity has indeed something to do with an original division: a division that structures the political space and cannot disappear. Politics is made of conflict, division and differences.

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